

PARADIGMS OF THE EMERGING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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Abstract. Alternatives from the perspective of Chinese traditions to the Western-origin IR theory are little known and have not entered the attention of IR practitioners or the mainstream of academic debate! This article attempts to provide some answers to a series of questions such as: Is there a specific IR approach in China and if so, to what extent is this approach active in Beijing's decision-making mechanism? What would be its strengths and vulnerabilities? How does China perceive "order" in the current IR system? What type of world order is on the horizon of Chinese leaders' expectations?

Keywords: *International Relations; Diplomacy; China in International Relations*

The alternatives from the perspective of Chinese traditions to the IR theory of Western origin are little known and have not entered the mainstream of academic debate. Western political philosophy (European or American) and implicitly IR theories (generated by the Westphalian system), are considered the universal and the basis of today's international system (IS). The Westphalian IS having always been under the pressure of conflicts, all highlighting the functionality problems of the norms and institutions associated with the system. In the context of the growth of the economic importance of Asia through the rise of China, South Korea and India, questioning an IR system of Western origin is natural. The need to "graft" the Western vein of IR thinking with solutions that have their foundations in East Asia triggered an interesting academic debate which may shape the future of IR theory and correspondingly the IS.¹

IR approaches associated with Chinese political culture are noticeable and also motivated by the need to resist a perceived Western intellectual hegemony.

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¹ Lucian Jora, "Considerații despre alternative chineze la teoria RI occidentală", in *Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale*, no. 4/2025, Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale Publishing House, Bucharest.

A further impetus for the reflection of the IR theory in China was given by the economic crisis of 2008, which further questioned the functionality of the international economic system conceptualized primarily by the USA.

The predictability of a great power's IR behavior implies to understand and anticipate its long-term strategies and implicitly its worldview. For Western political analysts, China's actions are difficult to anticipate, especially since, as in the game of Go, the Chinese sometimes anticipate moves by decades. For Chinese academia, China's exceptionalism is motivated by a cultural specificity with historical roots, by the socio-economic and demographic specificity of this country, and by the need to "burn the stages" through accelerated economic development, all conditioned by political stability.² The main research questions here would be: Is there a specific IR approach in China and, if so, to what extent is this approach active in Beijing's decision-making mechanism? What would be its strengths and vulnerabilities? How does China perceive "order" in the current IR system? What type of world order is on the horizon of Chinese leaders' expectations?

Among the sources intended to coagulate the Chinese theory of IR, the foundation may be represented by traditional Chinese philosophy (Confucianism and Taoism filtered through various versions of Chinese dialectical materialism), from which originate its key elements "harmony", "balance", "morality".³ The references in the current political discourse from Beijing that refer to "win-win policy" "mutually advantageous relations", "morality", "harmony", "balance" can be considered assimilations of neo-Confucian traditions (although they are present in the Western IR discourse as well).⁴

Among the things which left their mark on China's behavior in the IR usually are mentioned the "century of humiliation", the absence of colonial experience, the defensive political thinking, the "tributary" system of country that until the mid-19th century considered itself the center of the world.⁵ But the ancient Greek World or the Roman World also was considering themselves "centers of the known world" so, I do not see much specifically Chinese in Sino-centrism. The two revolutions that shook traditional Chinese society and its philosophical foundations (Sun Yat-sen's democratic revolution in 2011, respectively the CCP revolution) aimed to establish Chinese society on new foundations, considering Confucian philosophy responsible for the country's backwardness.⁶ The "New Confucianism" is the expression of contemporary Chinese political thought, including the field of IR theory, and a way to valorize traditional Confucianism through adaptation.⁷ It is about adapting a set of traditional values to today's

² *Ibidem*.

³ Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics, Reconceptualizing International Order: Contemporary Chinese Theories and Their Contributions to Global IR*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/reconceptualizing-international-order-contemporary-chinese-theories-and-their-contributions-to-global-ir/3EA614FBF13A5DDAB159F00354451865>, accessed on 11 August 2025.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Shuduo Gong, "Chinese revolution and culture", in *China Report*, 1989, 25(67), pp. 44-88.

⁶ Michael Dillon, *Contemporary China: An introduction*, Routledge, London, 2009.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

realities in order to achieve the declared “harmony” in IR.⁸ To note that “harmony” is vague enough to adapt to anything. How “harmony in IR” can be concretely defined and applied today remains to be seen, but today Chinese discourses abound in expressions such as “harmonious society“, “harmonious development“, “harmonious rise“.⁹

The circumstances Chinese IR theory is articulated, are different from those of the Western schools which had centuries to lay the foundations. Chinese intellectuals are forced to burn the stages, to catch up, to adapt and interpret from their own perspective already existing paradigms. It is difficult to be original just for the sake of being original and there has always been the political imperative of recovering the ancient Chinese political philosophy. Despite that most Chinese intellectuals have to work with concepts and theories resulting from Western experience. But are Thucydides, Machiavelli, Kant or Hobbes less relevant in Asia than in Europe? Or can their works be automatically mirrored or replaced with assertions from Confucius, Mencius, Sun Tze, etc.? ¹⁰

Another question would be to what extent the Chinese IR theories are the result of an internal effervescence and to what extent they are reactions to the hegemony of Western schools, reactions that seek to graft local perspectives onto a pre-existing system of Western origin or to build a new IR theory based on exclusive Chinese traditions. The Chinese IR school, is not a monolith either. Opinions differ regarding the coagulation of Chinese IR theory, which some place as early as the 1950s while others only after the 2000s, but most authors identify three stages.¹¹ A first stage would be since the creation of PR China in 1949 when the first research program in the field of IR was inaugurated at the Central University of China.¹² The second stage would be marked by the study of Western IR theories, at the insistence of Mao, in order to know the *enemy's way of thinking*.¹³ A third stage in the development of IR theory in China can be identified with Deng Xiaoping's reforms which reopened an older debate namely whether opening up to the outside world is necessary and inevitable, then how it should be done.¹⁴ The paradigm shifts was boosted by Deng Xiaoping *24-point strategy* that involved “looking inward” and “waiting for the right time” (i.e. building the foundations for a far-reaching IR policy based on a solid economic base).¹⁵ In this third stage, the works of the most important Western IR thinkers and theorists were translated into Chinese.¹⁶ A pre-theoretical phase

⁸ Rafael Suter, “New Confucianism and the Sinicization of Metaphysics and Transcendentalism: Conceptualizations of Philosophy in the Early Works of Xiong Shili and Mou Zongsan”, in *Concepts of Philosophy in Asia and the Islamic world*, Brill/Rodopi (e-book), 2018, pp. 348-393, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004360112>.

⁹ Lucian Jora. *art. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Kittipaisalsilpa Preechaya, “The Quest of Finding Chinese International Relations Theory”, *RJSH* Vol. 6, No. 1, January-June 2019, pp. 1-11.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Yaqing Qin, “Why is there no Chinese international relations theory”. *International Relations of The Asia-Pacific*, 2007, 7(3), pp. 313-340.

was dominated by the thinking of Mao Zedong who applied his own interpretation of Marxist dialectical materialist principles in explaining developments within the contemporary international system dominated by the Cold War, the conflict in Vietnam and Cambodia, respectively the conflicts within the communist bloc materialized in the Sino-Vietnamese War, the war between the Vietnamese communists and the Khmer Rouge, respectively the Sino-Russian tensions.¹⁷

In 1980, the *Association for the History of Chinese IR* was founded in Beijing, and a number of universities in China opened departments of IR and In Shanghai, was established, namely the *Shanghai Society of International Relations*, which organized the first symposium dedicated to IR theory in China in 1987.¹⁸ During the period 1991-2000, the Chinese academic community attempted also to assimilate the realism, neo-realism and constructivism, to explain China's position and interests in the IR system.¹⁹ Zi Zhongyun proposed that instead of formulating an IR theory with Chinese characteristics, it would be more beneficial for the Chinese academic community to engage in global debate on adapting established IR theories and adapting them to the specific context of China.²⁰ The phase of "learning and assimilating" Western theory would also include a subsequent phase from 2001-2007 when Chinese theorists assimilated and used especially Alexander Wendt's Constructivism to argue the theory of China's "Peaceful Rise".²¹ The Neo-Confucianism is identifiable in today's Chinese political discourse.²²

An example for this would be some illustrative expressions for the foreign policy objectives of the RP of China, on which the Chinese theory of IR is articulated, would be: "national rejuvenation" or "the Chinese dream".²³ They also can coagulate a new variant of "Sino-centrism" adapted to the realities of the contemporary international system and China's opening up to the world.²⁴ Prevalent in debates relevant to the Chinese IR theory would be "peaceful growth", referring to China's economic growth with the prospect of dethroning the USA and which according to neo-realist theory cannot be done without conflict. In this case, the theory of "peaceful growth/peaceful rise" offers solutions that do not degenerate into conflict.²⁵ However, the neo-realism is

¹⁷ Yaqing Qin, "Why is there no Chinese international relations theory?", in A. Acharya & B. Buzan (eds.), *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*, Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 26-50.

¹⁸ Guo Shuyong and Zhang Xiaoyin, "Influence of Xi Jinping's Diplomatic Thought on the Development of Chinese School: A Perspective Based on the History of International Relations Theory", in *International Review*, no. 5, 2022, pp. 2-12.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Zi Zhongyun, "Exploration of International Political Theory in China", in *International Economics Reviews*, no. 6, 1998, pp. 11-12.

²¹ Kittipaisalsilpa Preechaya, *art. cit.*, p. 4.

²² Leigh Jenco, "A political theory for them – but not for us?: Western theorists interpret the Chinese tradition", in *The Review of Politics*, 69 (22), 2007. DOI: 10.1017/S0034670507000551, p. 273.

²³ Zhu Zhiqun, *China's New Diplomacy: Rationale, Strategies and Significance* (2nd edition), Ashgate, Farnham, 2013, pp.126-129.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Benjamin Ho, "Chinese Thinking about International Relations From Theory to Practice", in *Essay in Asia Policy* 14.3, July 30, 2019, https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinese-thinking-about-international-relations-from-theory-to-practice/#_ftn5, accessed on 9 August 2025.

not the only Western IR theory. The Chinese theory of IR is constituted in the environment and in harmony with the ideology of the CCP, and the discourses regarding China's "peaceful rise" in IR may be consonant with the Constructivism.²⁶ Also researchers like Hung-Jen Wang believes that by attempting to adapt Western IR concepts to the Chinese context, their content itself is altered and from a certain level of adaptation they can be considered as indigenous.²⁷

The most established name in the field of IR in China, Zhao Tingyang from the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, published in 2005 *The Tianxia System – The Philosophy of a World Institution*. It is the most well-known and debated "responses" of contemporary Chinese political philosophy to the IR doctrines generated by the Westphalian system.²⁸ It is a worldview with roots in Chinese philosophy that has China at its center and which its author tries to adapt to the realities of the contemporary international system and to the prospects of globalization.²⁹ The novelty of the work lies in the attempt to combine and adapt traditional Chinese philosophy with elements of Western constructivism and Marxist-Maoist philosophy with ideological adaptations taken from Deng Xiao, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, in search of an IR theory adaptable to China's new position as a world superpower.³⁰ Adaptation is not easy because in ancient China, where Confucianism flourished, concepts such as *national sovereignty* or *nation* did not exist.³¹ Zhao Tingyang argues that the challenges of globalization can no longer be solved by Westphalian political philosophy and its derivatives liberalism, neo-liberalism, the Westphalian system being anarchic, inharmonious, driven by competition for resources, a source of endless conflicts.³² Zhao Tingyang offers antique and medieval China as the "center of the world" as a model (also the RI models of Westphalian origin are "Euro-centric" and start from the idea of Europe and the Western world as the "de facto" center of the world).³³ According to Zhao, in the context of the Confucian philosophical system, Tianxia signifies "everything under heaven" with a triple meaning: the terrestrial surface, the totality of the world population

²⁶ Qin Yaqing, "Development of International Relations Theory in China: Progress through Debates", in *International Studies* 46, no. 1-2, 2009, pp. 185-201.

²⁷ Hung-Jen Wang, *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2013, p. 2.

²⁸ Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-Xia)", in *Social Identities* 12, no. 1, January 2006, pp. 29-41; Tingyang Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-Xia)", in *Diogenes* 56, no. 1, February 1, 2009, pp. 5-18.

²⁹ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Press, New York, 2014, pp. 213-225.

³⁰ Stephen N. Smith, "World Order with Chinese Characteristics: The Development of Chinese International Relations Theory and Implications for China's Foreign Policy", Carleton University Ottawa, Ontario, 2020, p. 74, available on line at: https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/a94322d8-0a4c-44b2-9fc8-47b995211701/etd_pdf/461988d52f84d236cb90fd0d5ed0ae60/smith-worldorderwithchinesecharacteristicsthe%20development.pdf, accessed on 23.03.2022.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia)", *art. cit.*, p. 32.

³³ Pichamon Yeophantong, "Governing the World: China's Evolving Conceptions of Responsibility", in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 6, 2013, p. 337.

and a global world governance institution.³⁴ However so far I can notice that the ancient Chinese model of governance in which a supranational authority intervenes in the lower echelons that benefit from autonomy only when necessary and in the interest of the “collective good” (a rather strange concept, however, when applied to the realities of the ancient or medieval world) does not differ much from the *Pax Romana*, *Pax Mongolica*, *Pax Otomanica* and is consonant with ideas from Kant’s *Essay on Eternal Peace*.³⁵

Another dilemma for Zhao Tingyang would be the adaptation of the idea of “Chinese exceptionalism” with the universalism implied by a mainstream theory of IR.³⁶ For Zhao, the functioning of the UN could provide an example for the way a medieval “Sino-centric” concept may be adapted to the contemporary realities.³⁷ For Zhao, the quintessence of Tianxia is *collective interest*, unlike the Westphalian system and its derivatives, which prioritize the individual interest transposed to the individual interest of states, hence the difficulty of ensuring *harmony*, *balance* and *peace*.³⁸ He also notes that balance, when ensured, is a “balance of fear” of a military conflict with weapons of mass destruction.³⁹ The definition of the “collective interest”, and its real beneficiaries, remains a problem for Zhao as long as human society is still made up of individuals and most of the authoritarian systems known in the 20th century claimed to represent the “collective interest”. For Zhao, Tianxia provides stability thanks to the hierarchical system in which stronger and richer states help to weaker states.⁴⁰ However, the European colonial powers also claimed the same through the “mission civilisatrice”. Zhao mirrors Tianxia and its principle of “hierarchical harmony” with the principle of “balance of power” assumed by the “Westphalian system” which involves a permanent negotiation of any perceived imbalances which causes a climate of confrontation.⁴¹ “Harmony” implies a well-defined structure in which each member knows his role and duties respecting a pre-established hierarchy.⁴² However this way of thinking does not differ much from neo-realist principles who advocates the idea of an efficient global scale justice whose decisions would be binding and imposed on those concerned by the “de facto” great powers of the time. At Zhao, contemporary Tianxia does not consider the nation-state as the central

³⁴ Stephen N. Smith, *World Order with Chinese Characteristics: The Development of Chinese International Relations Theory and Implications for China’s Foreign Policy*, Carleton University Ottawa, Ontario, 2020, p. 74, https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/a94322d8-0a4c-44b2-9fc8-47b995211701/etd_pdf/461988d52f84d236cb90fd0d5ed0ae60/smith-worldorderwithchinesecharacteristicsthedevelopment.pdf, accessed on 23.03.2022.

³⁵ Lucian Jora, *art. cit.*

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

³⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁸ Tingyang Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-Xia)” *art. cit.*, and “A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-Xia)” *art. cit.*

³⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

⁴² Hagström Linus & Nordin Astrid H. M., “China’s “Politics of Harmony” and the Quest for Soft Power”, in *International Politics International Studies Review*, 2020, Oxford University Press. pp. 507-525.

unit in IR, but *humanity as a whole* and the *world order* is based on family values, by minimizing individual interest and maximizing *collective interest* and *harmony*.⁴³ The international system in Tianxia is like a large family of nations that have overcome the selfishness of sovereign nation-states.⁴⁴ However, there are elements consonant with these ideas in contemporary Western IR theory. *Globalist theories* and *globalism* itself refer to a *global society* with common problems that require common solutions, respectively, we have a whole constellation of works that talk about and analyze the *post-national*, *post-sovereign*, *post-industrial*, *post-modern world*. From this perspective Zhao's Tianxia theory can also be seen as an adaptation of Chinese Confucian philosophy to possible post-national, or post-modern realities.

Tianxia is described by Zhao in sufficiently general terms to accommodate a multitude of scenario and the principles of "harmony", "balance", "collective good" are sufficiently ideational to make it utopian. Moreover, today's Tianxia could only operate on the basis of the elements offered by the Westphalian system such as the *nation-state*, *national territory*, *sovereign states* equal "de jure". Political realism also recognizes that sovereign states equal "de jure" are unequal "de facto" hence "de facto" increased responsibilities for strong states.⁴⁵ Referring to Tianxia, Yaqing Qin talks about a possible "global state" or a possible future "world confederation".⁴⁶ Here, European or American analysts may perceive with suspicion a vision in which China is the "center of the world".

There are opinions according to which the methodological system through which Chinese academia tries to produce its own IR theories differs from the Western one, being rather focused on conceptual origins, cultural meanings and their relevance to Chinese civilization, and in a lesser extent an empirical analysis of today's realities.⁴⁷ Western analysts "accuse" the IR offerings of various Chinese schools of a certain anachronism, by analyzing contemporary phenomena from the perspective of selected and idealized ancient theories and texts and not on factual history.⁴⁸ References to *moral authority* and *family hierarchy* transposed into international practice are questionable especially when trying to validate them by relating them to history. Ancient China was unified in 221 BC by military

⁴³ Stephen N. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 74..

⁴⁴ Zhao Dongqian, "The evolution, achievements and prospects of the Chinese School of International Relations Theory, Xi'an International Studies University", in *Contemporary Eurasia*, January 2024, p. 23, DOI: 10.52837/2579-2970-2023.12.2-15.

⁴⁵ Allen R. Carlson, "Moving beyond sovereignty? A brief consideration of recent changes in China's approach to international order and the emergence of the tianxia concept", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2011, 20(68): 89-102.

⁴⁶ Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics, Reconceptualizing International Order: Contemporary Chinese Theories and Their Contributions to Global IR*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/reconceptualizing-international-order-contemporary-chinese-theories-and-their-contributions-to-global-ir/3EA614FBF13A5DDAB159F00354451865>, accessed on 11 August 2025.

⁴⁷ Yiwei Wang, "China: Between Copying and constructing", in A. Tickner & O. Wæver (eds.), *International Relations Scholarship Around The World*, Routledge, London, 2009, pp. 117-133 and Preechaya Kittipaisalsilpa, "The Quest of Finding Chinese International Relations Theory", in *RJSH* Vol. 6, No. 1, January-June 2019, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

force and not by the effect of Confucian moral principles.⁴⁹ Considerations are added related to the homogeneity of Chinese culture, which then as now is complex and diverse. Also, for sure virtues like *morality* or *harmony* are not exclusive Chinese attributes and sins like *individualism*, *anarchy*, *greed for power and resources* are not exclusive Western.

Another element of concern regarding *the tributary system* or contemporary Tianxia is that it would represent a future global hegemonic mechanism.⁵⁰ Here it is the duty of Chinese intellectuals to demonstrate, explain, and credibly argue the opposite, although Zhao, the creator of the concept, already explains how Tianxia would be a kind of international entity similar to the UN but with more authority, impartiality, and capacity for real intervention.⁵¹ Another problem observed is the often different connotation of concepts in Chinese even when they are taken from Western sources. The bizarreness and relative nature of some concepts is partly determined by the difficulty (and sometimes impossibility) of translating Chinese concepts into English or other European languages.⁵² The meaning of concepts such as *International Society*, *Tributary System*, *Power*, etc. may differ.⁵³ Add to this the non-confrontational and introverted tradition of East Asian academia in general, where silence is often preferred to adversarial debate. Chinese intellectuals need to find a language that is accessible in environments other than Chinese or East Asian ones, as the universality of a theory begins when it transcends geographical, cultural and linguistic barriers.

The authors of these theories are not historians but theorists, and the antipathy between historians and theorists is old and concerns the working methodology. Theorists often start by sketching an attractive theoretical model and then select from a complex historical reality only events and aspects intended to confirm the model. The eventual that does not support the model is removed or ignored. Few resist the temptation not to spoil the beauty of a theoretical model for the sake of presenting complexity, because yes, history is far too complex to be framed in rigid models. I also notice that IR theorists attach practices that have existed for millennia to the time of their theorization. Professor Nye invented the concept of “Soft Power” but the practice of persuasion through culture and propaganda was there for millennia. Sun Tzu in the *Art of War* considered the supreme refinement to defeat the opponent through persuasion and not through weapons and Confucian philosophy insists on the idea of attraction and persuasion as preferable to coercion. Machiavelli theorized Machiavellianism but “Machiavellian practices” existed since the existence of the political community. Morgenthau theorized “political realism” which does not mean that the practices attached to “political realism” have not existed for millennia. Implicitly, practices attached to a specific behavior of China in IR exist, what is missing is their coagulation in a theoretical system sufficiently well structured, clear and coherent to enter the “mainstream” of IR theory.

⁴⁹ Yongjin Zhang, “The idea of order in ancient Chinese political thought: a Wightian exploration”, in *International Affairs* 90: 1, 2014, p.178 https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/riia/v90i1/f_0, accessed on 30.03.2022.

⁵⁰ Callahan, W. A., “Sino-speak: Chinese exceptionalism and the politics of history”. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2012, 71(1), 33-55.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Preechaya Kittipaisalsilpa, *art. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

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